

CHICAGO SUN TIMES

As country reckons with racial disparities, Northwestern law students continue push for more Black faculty members

Law students went public with their efforts to urge the administration to address the lack of Black faculty after the death of George Floyd. “That my silence was contributing to the racist environment, it no longer sat right for me to not speak up,” said McKayla Stokes, a recent graduate.

By [Elvia Malagón](#)

Jul 9, 2020, 10:00am PST



The Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, located at 375 E. Chicago Ave. is seen in this photo on July 2, 2020.
Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

When the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law sent a message to students to address the death of George Floyd, it didn't detail that, for months, students at the law school had pushed for the administration to address the low number of Black faculty members teaching there.

Frustrated by the lack of action over diversity concerns that students had spoken out about for months and by top school officials not explicitly stating, "Black lives matter," students like McKayla Stokes, a recent law school graduate, went public with their concerns.

Issues within the faculty weren't isolated, one current law student said, trickling down to students through microaggressions in the classroom.

"That my silence was contributing to the racist environment, it no longer sat right for me to not speak up," Stokes said.

In recent weeks, she and others used the hashtag #NLawIndifference, a spin on the school's marketing slogan, to chronicle their efforts to get the law school to spell out a plan to hire, retain and promote diverse faculty members.

In the wake of the unrest caused by George Floyd's death, students nationwide have gone public with their efforts to get educational institutions to address racism. At the University of Michigan Law School, students used #MLawLoud to amplify the experiences of Black students. In June, an Instagram account named "Black at Harvard Law" shared anonymous stories from Black students.

Northwestern recently announced Dean Kim Yuracko was stepping down from the law school July 31 to take a role within the university's office of provost. Yuracko declined to be interviewed but sent a statement to the Chicago Sun-Times.

Yuracko pointed to a letter published in June highlighting some of the efforts the school planned to undertake to address the students' concerns, such as hiring more Black faculty, hiring a consultant to help the school with diversity efforts and undergoing anti-racism training. The letter cited two recently hired faculty members as examples of reaching those goals.

"But we have more work to do," Yuracko said in the statement. "I recognize that, my administrators recognize that, and the faculty recognizes that. We are firmly committed to improving the Law School experience for our Black students, and creating a culture where all members of our community feel valued and respected."

Nora Snyder, a recent law school graduate, said the push for change wasn't aimed at one person but rather the entire law school. She is hopeful whoever leads the school will commit to making systemic changes and that students of color will have a say in who becomes dean.

The students' efforts started last summer after realizing three Black faculty members had left Northwestern. A group of 20 to 25 students came together, calling themselves "concerned students," and pushed for the law school administration to address the departures.

Cyerra McGowan, a law student and former president of the Black Law Student Association, said the departures of Black faculty left students at the time with just two Black faculty members. There were 240 faculty members during the 2018-2019 year, according to the school's American Bar Association disclosure.

About 8% of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law's tenure-track faculty are Black compared with 75% who are white, according to a 2019 report from the university's office of institutional diversity and inclusion. About 3% of the law school's clinical and instructional faculty are Black compared with 88% who

are white, according to the same report. Nearly 5% of the law school's student body is Black.

Another report from the same office examined faculty data from fall 2006 through fall 2015. During that period, the law school had four Black tenure faculty members, though the number of Black tenure faculty members decreased to two in 2012 and 2013. The law school had fewer than four Black instructional and clinical faculty members during that time, with the number dipping to one Black faculty member in 2015.

At the top 14 law schools, including Northwestern, minority faculty members make up 5% to 19% of faculty resources, according to data universities provided to the American Bar Association in 2019. Georgetown University's law school has the lowest percentage — 5% — of minority faculty members.

Nearly 13% of Northwestern's law school's faculty consists of minorities. Law schools at the University of Virginia and the University of Michigan had lower percentages of minority faculty — 10% — than Northwestern. The University of Pennsylvania has the highest percentage with minority faculty making up 19.92%.



A group of law students who call themselves “concerned students” organized a town hall last fall after learning that three Black faculty members had left without any formal acknowledgment from Northwestern Pritzker School of Law.

Provided.

Last fall, the students organized a town hall with Yuracko to discuss the culture that led to the departure of Black faculty members. In the months that followed, the students met with the dean, wrote memos and offered feedback to a plan she had created to address the diversity concerns. Students say that plan was scrapped amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

For McGowan, the year of pushing for the school to address its race issues left her feeling frustrated. On top of navigating law school as a Black student, she and other students feel a burden to push for diversity issues by joining

committees, leading organizations and spearheading efforts like they did this past year.

“We are having the same conversation, and we haven’t moved the needle on anything,” said McGowan.

The group felt strongly they shouldn’t be expected to find solutions to the school’s diversity problems, said Nellie Mitchell, another law school student.

Law student Luke Fernbach said the group didn’t initially want to go public with their efforts, because they worried about retaliation especially against Black students speaking out.

“We all know that the law historically has been used as a tool to subjugate and oppress Black people in this country from the country’s founding,” Fernbach said. “As a law school, if we are not actively working to dismantle that racist system, then we are just contributing to it if we aren’t challenging it and trying to disrupt it.”

Stokes, now a recent graduate, plans to figure out how alumni can help students continue to put pressure on the new dean to make changes to the school’s culture. For now, she would like to see a timeline and more transparency about the work the school’s consultant will do.

“Those of us who are most involved love Northwestern just as much, if not more,” Stokes said. “That’s why we are committed.”

Elvia Malagón’s reporting on social justice and income inequality is made possible by a grant from the Chicago Community Trust.